



News from

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TANCREDO REQUESTS GAO TO INVESTIGATE PUBLIC LAND AGENCIES' ROLE WITHIN NEW HOMELAND SECURITY DEPARTMENT

***Calls on McInnis, Radanovich to Examine Ability of Public Land Management Agencies to Cope with
Border Security Challenges***

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Representative Tom Tancredo (R-CO), Chairman of the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus, sent a letter today to Rep. George Radanovich (R-CA), Chairman of the U.S. House Resources Committee's Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands, and Rep. Scott McInnis (R-CO), Chairman of the U.S. House Resources Committee's Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, to request their assistance in commissioning a General Accounting Office (GAO) investigation to determine whether or not the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Parks Service are adequately integrated into the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

"I remain concerned that without some action to shore up the ability of these [public lands] agencies to adequately protect Interior and Forest Service resources from the steadily growing tide of illegal traffic, it is not a matter of if another major incident will occur along the border, but when," wrote Tancredo. "Reports continue to proliferate of federal law enforcement officers making contact with increasing numbers of aliens from a variety of countries in National Parks and National Forests along the northern and southern borders."

Recently, CBS news ran a segment that contained footage of hundreds of aliens backpacking across the U.S.-Mexico border in the Organ Pipe National Monument – a unit of the Park system that Rep. Tancredo raised specific security concerns about last summer after a National Parks Service Ranger was fatally shot in the park. More than six months after the shooting, and a year-and-a-half since September 11th, the homeland security situation in these border areas continues to be volatile and unpredictable at best.

In addition to concerns about the safety of Park and Forest Rangers and the communities adjacent to the border, Rep. Tancredo addressed the security threat to the countless vital public facilities located on public lands. The letter also emphasized the fact that U.S. House Resources Committee Chairman, Rep. Richard Pombo (R-CA), recently pointed out in a letter to the newly established homeland security panel earlier this month in which he clearly states, "As the threats grow along our borders...less than fifty law enforcement officers [are] available to manage these [areas]," I agree, and I am pleased to see that Mr.

Pombo and others have recognized the seriousness of this growing threat. I was also encouraged by the Senate Finance Committee Chairman Grassley held earlier this year, and the light those hearings have shed on how breathtakingly inadequate our defenses actually on our public lands – a component of homeland security efforts that seems to have been overlooked or neglected over the course of the last eighteen months.

“It is my sincere hope that the Select Homeland Security Committee will see fit to take up the issue of how best to plug this gaping hole in our homeland defenses,” Tancredo wrote. “I believe it would be advantageous to ask the GAO to investigate to what extent – if any – the public land management agencies functions are integrated with those of the new Homeland Security Department, and to what extent they are equipped to carry out those functions.”

The text of the letter follows:

February 27, 2003

The Honorable George Radanovich
Chairman
Subcommittee on Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
1333 Longworth Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Scott McInnis
Chairman
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
1337 Longworth Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Radanovich and Chairman McInnis:

I am writing you to express my continuing concerns about the inability of the public land management agencies to cope with the increasing homeland security challenges along the international borders we share with Canada and Mexico. Since first writing you on the topic last August, I have seen little to assuage the fears I articulated at that time, and in fact, all evidence seems to indicate that the problems are getting significantly worse.

Reports continue to proliferate of federal law enforcement officers making contact with increasing numbers of aliens from a variety of countries in National Parks and National Forests along the northern and southern borders. CBS news, for example, recently ran a segment that contained footage of hundreds of aliens backpacking across the U.S.-Mexico border in the Organ Pipe National Monument – a unit of the Park system that I raised specific security concerns with last summer after a Park Ranger there was fatally shot. More than six months after the shooting, and a year-and-a-half since September 11th, the homeland security situation in these border areas continues to be volatile and unpredictable at best.

In addition to concerns about the safety of Park and Forest Rangers and the communities adjacent to the border, I am also troubled by the security threat this crisis poses to the countless vital public facilities located on these public lands. Dams, power lines, gas pipelines, and other vital public

infrastructure components are placed at continual risk by the increasing volume of illegal traffic and lack of meaningful enforcement in these areas.

Other, less conventional threats are also areas of concern. The susceptibility of livestock on BLM or Forest Service rangelands to bioterrorist threats, and the residual impacts such an attack could have on the larger U.S. agricultural economy, for example, or the kind of resource damage and chaos that could be creating by an individual intentionally igniting a forest fire.

In short, I remain concerned that without some action to shore up the ability of these agencies to adequately protect Interior and Forest Service resources from the steadily growing tide of illegal traffic, it is not a matter of if another major incident will occur along the border, but when. As Chairman Pombo recently pointed out in a letter to the newly established homeland security panel earlier this month, "As the threats grow along our borders...less than fifty law enforcement officers [are] available to manage these [areas]," I agree, and I am pleased to see that Mr. Pombo and others have recognized the seriousness of this growing threat. I was also encouraged by the Senate Finance Committee Chairman Grassley held earlier this year, and the light those hearings have shed on how breathtakingly inadequate our defenses actually on our public lands – a component of homeland security efforts that seems to have been overlooked or neglected over the course of the last eighteen months.

While I am hopeful that the Select Homeland Security Committee will see fit to take up the issue of how best to plug this gaping hole in our homeland defenses, I believe that, as the committee that oversees the public land agencies, we should continue to do our part to focus on this important issue.

I believe that one important step in doing so is assessing the magnitude of the problem. While I have spoken to numerous people "on the ground" who can attest to the seriousness of the problem, I believe it would be advantageous to ask the General Accounting Office to investigate to what extent – if any – the public land management agencies functions are integrated with those of the new Homeland Security Department, and to what extent they are equipped to carry out those functions. As Subcommittee Chairmen, the two of you have more influence with GAO, and are better positioned than I am to ask them to undertake and complete such an audit in a timely fashion. I would hope you give serious consideration to doing so.

Thank you in advance for your continued assistance on the issue, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Tom Tancredo
Member of Congress

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